

The Calgary Working Class and the Social Credit Movement in Alberta, 1932-35

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The Calgary Working Class and the Social Credit Movement in Alberta, 1932-35

Larry Hannant

THE SOCIAL CREDIT MOVEMENT and government in Alberta constitutes one of the most closely-examined phenomena in Canadian history. Among the many studies of it, C.B. Macpherson's *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System*, written in 1953, was one of the first. Some recent criticism notwithstanding, it is still regarded as the classic work on the subject.¹ Perhaps because of the authority of Macpherson's contention that farmers have exercised overwhelming political domination in Alberta and in the Social Credit movement, no one has yet conducted even the most superficial study of the role of the working class in Calgary in the growth of that movement up to the election of the first such government in the world in August 1935. The formative influence of the Calgary working class on Social Credit has therefore been overlooked.

To redress that imbalance, this essay will demonstrate first that Calgary in the 1930s had a relatively large and politically active working class. Moreover, it will be shown that workers — as individuals and en masse — injected a powerful drive into the organization of the Social Credit movement in the critical period of its infancy and adolescence.

I

FROM THE BIRTH OF the province, labour's influence on Alberta provincial politics was significant, a fact which is often overshadowed by the strength of the farmers' movements of the early twentieth century. The triumph of the farmers' concept of group government which occurred with the election of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) as the provincial administration in 1921 did not leave the labour movement untouched. In fact, it spurred labour to insure that, in districts where workers formed the majority of electors, labour repre-

¹ John Richards and Larry Pratt, *Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West* (Toronto 1979), 150-1.

Larry Hannant, "The Calgary Working Class and the Social Credit Movement in Alberta, 1932-35," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 97-116.

sentatives were sent to the provincial legislature and House of Commons. Often they had support from farm organizations.

In this electoral cooperation, Calgary was a site of substantial success. In 1921 two labour representatives endorsed by the UFA were elected to the provincial legislature.² One of the two, Fred J. White, represented Calgary in the legislature continuously until 1935.³ In the December 1921 federal election, William Irvine, endorsed by the UFA, took the East Calgary seat on a labour ticket. He was defeated in 1925, but the next year another labour candidate benefited from UFA endorsement to recapture the seat.⁴ Again in the 1930 federal election, labour was a strong contender, but failed to buck the Conservative tide that swept the country.⁵

The Canadian Labour Party (CLP), the name under which these labour politicians contested seats, was far from a homogeneous entity. Organized in 1921 by socialists and trade unionists,⁶ it also contained a large number of Communists, especially in Alberta. In 1924 the Workers' Party of Canada (whose name was changed to the Communist Party of Canada [CPC] the same year) joined the CLP as a separate body and urged other political organizations to do the same.⁷ Delegates of the CPC attended CLP meetings, sought and obtained office, and stood as CLP candidates in federal and provincial elections, and in Alberta their influence was greater than in most other provinces. A member of the Workers' Party sat in the Alberta legislature as a CLP member during the early 1920s.⁸ In Alberta it was frequently a strife-torn marriage,⁹ but it survived there longer than elsewhere. Formally purged in 1929 CPC influence was still present in 1935.¹⁰

Alberta was also a stronghold for the Communist Party. During the 1920s it had the second largest number of units of any province, trailing only Ontario.¹¹ The many miners in the province helped account for much of the party's membership — miners and unskilled labourers comprised almost 80 per cent of

² Howard Scarrow, *Canada Votes: A Handbook of Federal and Provincial Election Data* (New Orleans 1962), 202.

³ *Calgary Herald*, 19 July 1921, 1; and 20 June 1930, 1.

⁴ Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930* (Kingston 1968), 253.

⁵ *Calgary Herald*, 29 July 1930, 5.

⁶ Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975), 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹ Robin, *Radical Politics*, 258-9.

¹⁰ *Alberta Labor News* (although officially the organ of the Alberta Federation of Labor, it also served as the CLP organ) 27 April 1935, 1, for example, reports on the narrow defeat of a motion seeking unity between the CLP and the CP at the CLP convention that month. The motion was sponsored by a CLP member who was recognized as a communist in a 22 June 1929, 4, editorial dealing with the CLP decision to oust communists.

¹¹ Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 33.

those who joined the CPC during a 1930 recruitment drive.¹² The party was also bolstered by the affiliation of organizations of Ukrainian workers and farmers from Alberta.¹³

Like most cities in the Canadian West, Calgary was formally founded before the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway but remained little more than a Royal Canadian Mounted Police post and a clump of shacks and tents until the railroad steamed in. In 1881 the population was 75; by 1884, a year after the CPR arrived, it was 428.¹⁴ The CPR also stamped the future shape of the city by deciding to locate its station west of the Elbow river, although the original settlement had been east of the river.¹⁵ With that single stroke, East Calgary lost its real estate value and glamour. Thereafter it was relegated to being the site of factories and the residential districts housing factory workers. By 1910, 800 men worked in nine industrial plants in the city, most of them in the east end, and ranging in size from 12 to 300 employees.¹⁶ The city was then buzzing about the promised establishment by the CPR of its Ogden Shops, rail car construction and repair shops which were expected ultimately to employ 5,000.¹⁷ Although that employment figure turned out to be grandiose, at its peak about 1930 some 2,000 men worked in the east-end plant, the largest single industrial site in the city.¹⁸

Keeping pace with Canada as a whole during the first three decades of the twentieth century, Calgary grew spectacularly. It leaped from being a modest-sized town of 4,091 in 1901 to a city of 43,704 in a single decade, then just about doubled again in population by 1931.¹⁹ But the depression which began in 1930 was not kind to Calgary; it abruptly punctured this ballooning growth. City officials and the *Calgary Herald* warned that Calgary's "generous" relief rates were attracting thousands of freeloaders who had never before seen Calgary,²⁰ but in fact the population was not increasing. It declined from 83,761 in 1931 to 83,407 in 1936.²¹

Although not usually regarded as an industrial city, a substantial portion of Calgary's population in 1931 should be classified as industrial working class. Table 1 below depicts the industrial and the non-industrial working-class repre-

¹² *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴ Bob Shiels, *Calgary: A Not Too Solemn Look at Calgary's First 100 Years* (Calgary 1975), 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45-6.

¹⁶ Max Foran, "Land Speculation and Urban Development in Calgary 1884-1914," in Anthony Rasporich and Henry Klassen, eds., *Frontier Calgary: Town, City and Region 1875-1914* (Calgary 1975), 211.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁸ Interview with C.M. Baker.

¹⁹ *Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1936*, Volume I, Table 4, 833.

²⁰ *Calgary Herald*, 18 April 1932, 4.

²¹ *Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1936*, Volume I, Table 4, 833.

sentation in Calgary. For purposes of comparison, figures for two cities of similar size, Regina and Windsor, are also given.²²

TABLE I
Composition of the Working Class in
Calgary, Regina, and Windsor in 1931

	Calgary		Regina		Windsor	
	# of workers	% of gainfully occupied	# of workers	% of gainfully occupied	# of workers	% of gainfully occupied
Industrial						
Manufacturing	1908	5.2	738	3.3	3469	14
Electric light & power	374	1	219	1	328	1.3
Building & construction	2682	7.4	1592	7.2	2063	8.3
Transportation & commun.	3013	8.3	1618	7.3	2036	8.2
Warehousing & storage	618	1.7	384	1.7	326	1.3
Mining, quarrying, oil & salt wells	115	.3	12	.05	17	.07
Logging	41	.1	5	.02	4	.02
Subtotal — industrial working class	8751	24.0	4568	20.5	8243	33.2
% of total population	10.4		8.6		13.1	
Non-industrial						
Clerical (workers only)	4898	13.5	3891	17.5	2919	11.8
Trade (salesmen & women)	2487	6.8	1523	6.8	1668	6.7
Service (workers only)	3484	9.6	2263	10.1	1848	7.5
General labour	4267	11.7	2478	11.1	2736	11
Agricultural labour	944	2.6	355	1.6	173	.7
Subtotal — non-industrial working class	16,081	44.2	10,510	47.2	9344	37.6
Total workers	24,831	68.2	15,078	67.8	17,587	70.9
% of total population	29.6		28.3		27.9	
Total gainfully occupied	36,405		22,255		24,803	
Total city population	83,761		53,209		63,106	

Source: *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Volume VII, Table 40 and Table 57.

²² Source for this table: *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Volume VII, Table 40, 146-68 (Alta. and Sask.), and Table 57, 738-44 and 750-63.

Despite their differences in working-class composition, the three cities were remarkably similar: Calgary at 68.2 per cent, Regina at 67.8 per cent, and Windsor at 70.9 per cent. One other figure is of some significance: in Calgary, 29.6 per cent of the total population was comprised of workers, a proportion which was larger than in either Regina (28.3 per cent) or Windsor (27.9 per cent). The significance of this figure is important to keep in mind: even in the midst of the Depression, almost one-third of the total population of Calgary was working class.

II

CALGARY WAS HIT HARD by unemployment during the 1930s. Table 2 shows that from 1930 to 1935 the city suffered a decline of more than 20 per cent in the number of employees in manufacturing. The figure of 20 per cent is also an accurate estimate of the proportion of the work force unemployed in both the province and the city. At the time, month-to-month unemployment figures were not kept with the same appearance of accuracy as today, but what figures are available suggest that between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of the work force was not employed. The 1 June 1936 census discovered 24,770 unemployed people in the province, about 15 per cent of the total work force of 169,439 (unemployed included).²³ It reported further that 6,877 people in Calgary were not working, representing about 16 per cent of the work force.²⁴ But these federal census totals may be considerably understated if figures on the number of people on relief in the city are examined. The 1936 census takers found 3,269 people on relief.²⁵ By contrast, on 1 May, 1932, Calgary city officials reported that during the previous month the city had provided relief to 1,988 families, comprised of 8,106 people, and that another 2,000 single men were receiving federal and provincial aid.²⁶ Rather than improvement, the next few years brought even more difficulties. In February 1933, 10,727 people in the city were on relief, and that figure rose to 12,000 in June 1934.²⁷

The immense number of people out of work and their shabby treatment by governments and police created fertile ground for the CPC's organizations of unemployed workers. During the early 1930s in Calgary, the combined relief payments by all three levels of government averaged just over \$10 per person each month,²⁸ and for that pittance, able-bodied persons were expected to work 40 hours a month on special projects created by the city. Moreover, city officials, facing relief costs that rose from \$53,000 in 1929 to \$334,000 in

²³ *Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1936*, Volume II, Table 30, 1084.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Calgary Herald*, 21 May 1932, 15; and 12 June 1934, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5 April 1933, 11; and 12 June 1934, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 May 1932, 15; and 5 April 1933, 11.

TABLE 2
 Manufacturing Establishments and Employees
 in Calgary in 1930 and 1935

	1930	1935	% change 1930-1935
Manufacturing establishments	153	164	+ 7.2
Employees	5287	4208	-20.4

Source: 1933 *Official Handbook of Present Conditions and Recent Progress* (Ottawa 1933); and 1939 *Official Handbook of Present Conditions and Recent Progress* (Ottawa 1939).

1932,²⁹ and threatened periodically with tax payment strikes by homeowners outraged by mill rate increases,³⁰ introduced one scheme after another to pare pennies from the already meagre relief payments. Workers were cut off relief for infractions as minor as refusing a supervisor's orders on relief work sites.³¹

The penny-pinching and harassment had their effect. Communist-led organizations of married and single men, ex-servicemen, and single women were formed early in the decade, and for several years they were almost constantly locked in battle with police and government authorities. One of the contests was a November 1934 strike in which relievers refused to work on city projects because of drastic cuts in their relief stipends. The ensuing battle was called "the biggest strike of unemployed ever to take place in Canada" by the CPC's paper, *The Worker*.³² As well as being large, it was also one of the longest. The strikers held out for 85 days, using mass demonstrations, picketing of work sites, mass meetings, and marches through downtown department stores — "outlaw" shopping 'tours,' as *The Worker* described them — to put pressure on the council.³³ In late January the strikers agreed to a city-proposed compromise which left neither side better off in monetary terms. But *The Worker* claimed that even maintaining the status quo was a victory.³⁴ It also announced later that the strike gave a potent boost to the membership of the unemployed organizations and to the CPC itself, which gained 50 new recruits in a two-month organization drive, bringing its total membership in Alberta to about 1,000.³⁵

But splits dating back at least to June 1934 had begun to appear in the unemployed organizations,³⁶ and a rival organization of unemployed was

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 April 1931, 3; and 18 April 1932, 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7 April 1933, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19 April 1932, 9.

³² *The Worker*, 17 November 1934, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12 December 1934, 1, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1935, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1935, 1; and 11 May 1935, 2.

³⁶ *Calgary Herald*, 18 June 1934, 3.



Relief marchers, Calgary, 1935. This was the march of the United Married Men's Association down 2nd Street East. The sign reads: "We stand behind 12,000 on relief." From Glenbow Archives, Calgary Alberta, photographer A.F. Tigerstedt, No. NA-2800-12.



Unemployed marching at Calgary, Alberta, 1936. From Glenbow Archives, Calgary, photographer A.F. Tigerstedt, No. NA-4532-1. (Marcher at lower right hand side of the photo is Patrick Lenihan.)

formed in June 1935, just before another relief strike was launched.³⁷ Moreover, an entirely new spectre was sweeping the city — the prospect of a Social Credit government in Alberta. A CPC organizer of the time says that already during the 1934-5 relief strike the Social Credit promise of \$25 a month for every adult in the province had begun to undermine the strikers' determination.³⁸ The CPC leader in the province, Andy Hogarth, also blamed the defeat of the July 1935 relief strike on Social Credit promises.³⁹ By that time it was obvious to everyone in the province that in Social Credit they were witnessing a political marvel in the making.

III

SOCIAL CREDIT'S AMAZING conquest of the province of Alberta in just three years had discernibly different stages. These developmental steps broadly corresponded with, first, the establishment of a base in Calgary, and, second, use of this base to complete the organization of virtually every section of the province. The process, while quite evident now, was also recognized by contemporary participants and observers. *The Worker*, for example, noted in March 1934, and again in February and May 1935, that "the social credit wave and its craziness" had first inundated Calgary and then swept into the countryside.⁴⁰ The Communists mistook this for a repudiation of Social Credit by Calgary workers,⁴¹ an error which was brutally pointed out 22 August 1935, when four Social Crediters were among the six city candidates elected to the legislature. The move from Calgary, then, was a step from strength to greater strength for Social Credit, and not a retreat at all.

The spark that kindled the Social Credit fire is properly considered to be William Aberhart's conversion to the monetary theory. In summer 1932, encouraged by a fellow teacher, Aberhart read a popular exposition of Major Clifford Douglas' theory, and became firmly convinced that it was the solution to the severe crisis then gripping Alberta and most of the world.⁴² New to the doctrine, and to politics, Aberhart throughout fall 1932 restricted his public agitation on the subject to weaving Social Credit ideas into his weekly evangelical radio broadcasts, which had been bringing the voice of the fundamentalist preacher into the homes of several thousand people since 1925.⁴³ But in January 1933 a new stage was launched when Aberhart took the important step of organizing the first Social Credit study group. It brought 30 people into the Prophetic Bible Institute in downtown Calgary for lessons not only in

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 June 1935, 10.

³⁸ Interview with Pat Lenihan.

³⁹ *The Worker*, 17 August 1935, 3.

⁴⁰ *The Worker*, 17 March 1934, 4; 20 February 1935, 3; 11 May 1935, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 17 March 1934, 4; and 20 February 1935, 3.

⁴² John Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta* (Toronto 1959), 48-9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30.

Aberhart's version of Social Credit theory, but also in public speaking and other skills essential to the successful extension of Social Credit outside the institute.⁴⁴

This cohort of Social Credit zealots was to have an influence which far outstripped its numbers. From this group came many of Aberhart's lieutenants who would play important, but often overlooked, secondary leadership roles in the movement. From this group came several of the itinerant and indigent propagandists who crisscrossed the province giving lectures and organizing study groups in church basements, community halls, schoolhouses, and living rooms.

Before they descended upon the unsuspecting farmers, this band of proselytizers was unleashed upon Calgary. After three months' instruction, and with Aberhart's invocation to go forth and multiply, the 30 original study group members set out to fan enthusiasm in the city. So assiduously did they pursue this task during summer 1933 that Aberhart, returning from his own successful tour of towns south of Calgary, was overwhelmed by the response to his institute lectures.⁴⁵ The great number of people clamouring for information on Social Credit dictated a revamp of the pattern of keeping study groups in the institute. Accordingly, in early fall Aberhart appealed for volunteers from his original group to set up study groups throughout the city. Under the leadership of this vanguard, by the end of 1933 the conquest of Calgary was well underway.⁴⁶

A critical victory in this conquest was winning over the working class of central, northeast, and southeast Calgary. Mrs. Donald L. MacCulloch, one of those who carried the battle from the Eighth Avenue institute to eastern Calgary working-class districts, described her activities in this way:

So I went over to the Labor Temple where . . . was in charge, preaching Socialism and Communism to the poor working men. I found out I could hold meetings there, so for over three years all my groups met as a large group in this Labor Temple. The time we were taking the straw vote [January 1935] I had over 8,000 names signed up in that district. I took those people right away from Socialism and Communism and sold them on Social Credit.⁴⁷

The straw vote was a form of public opinion poll in which the Social Credit forces asked people whether or not they would vote for a pure Social Credit candidate if one stood in the provincial election expected soon. The poll showed that in the entire province, 71,000 people would be favourable to Social Credit candidates. More than 11 per cent of those people, some 8,000 in all, lived in Victoria Park. The fact that this huge vote came from just one district of east Calgary is a testament to Mrs. MacCulloch's organizing success and demonstrates the importance of the area for Social Credit. It also indicates

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

the high level of Social Credit organization in Calgary working-class districts, even at that relatively early date. As the whole population of Calgary was just 11 per cent of the provincial population at that time, the disproportionately large share of Calgary working-class support for Social Credit becomes clear.

Throughout fall 1933 Social Credit speakers made frequent trips to small centres surrounding Calgary to spread the gospel, but the city itself was still far better organized than any other area. By January 1934 in Calgary there were 30 study groups of at least seven people each, according to a report by one of the ablest of Aberhart's lieutenants, Mrs. Edith Rogers.⁴⁸ By May 1934, with study groups multiplying at a prodigious rate and the city swollen to the bursting point, the movement's logical next venture was a sustained and organized drive into the hinterland. Aberhart himself was willing only to repeat a tour of the area south of Calgary, where his popularity had been assured from his radio broadcasts.⁴⁹ At that point, Mrs. Rogers, who had initiated the use of study groups and recommended it for the movement,⁵⁰ again became the spur to an essential enlargement of the movement. Bolstered by her success in organizing among Calgary's working-class women in winter 1933-4, Mrs. Rogers proposed an ambitious offensive into the hitherto foreign territory north of Calgary. Aberhart refused to sanction the undertaking and turned down a request from Joe Unwin for a \$40 loan to buy a car for the tour by Mrs. Rogers, her husband, and himself. Without Aberhart's blessing, the three nonetheless went forward with the tour,⁵¹ and it was later acknowledged to have been instrumental in winning central and northern Alberta districts to Social Credit.⁵² By the end of 1934 study groups were established in nearly every rural area south of Edmonton.⁵³ Summer 1934 is considered to be the point at which the Social Credit movement became established as a rural movement.⁵⁴ But the importance of the leadership emanating from Calgary and the ongoing agitation in the city cannot be denied. Throughout this period the barrage of publicity about the movement's activities, as well as newspaper articles and letters to the editor "profoundly impressed the villages, towns and other cities of southern Alberta, all of which were served by the metropolis' newspapers."⁵⁵

Although northern Alberta districts were not being ignored by Social Credit speakers, study groups were set up much later and in fewer numbers there than in Calgary and its environs. There is no record of the existence of any signif-

⁴⁸ Harold Schultz, "William Aberhart and the Social Credit Party: A Political Biography," (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1959), 91, citing Mrs. Rogers' Organizational Diary-Notebook, 1934-35, Volume 2, Entry of January 17, 1934.

⁴⁹ Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, 189-90.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

cant number of study groups in Edmonton until March 1935,⁵⁶ and even in August 1935, just before the election, there were only 27 study groups in that city.⁵⁷ In contrast, there were 63 groups in Calgary by August 1935, and 1,600 in the province as a whole.⁵⁸ Still, the movement and Aberhart's own popular appeal were strong enough to bring a crowd of 5,000 to a meeting in Edmonton in May 1935. However, this was a smaller audience than attended meetings the same month in the minor southern Alberta cities of Medicine Hat, where 8,000 people attended a rally, and Lethbridge, where 5,000 to 6,000 were present.⁵⁹

Probably no one has so succinctly expressed the dynamism with which the Social Credit movement broadcast its message, first through the city, then out to the rest of Alberta, as Arthur Wray, a clerical jack-of-all-trades who has recalled that in 1933

Aberhart called for volunteers to organize groups all over Calgary. I got right into this work for him, as I realized he couldn't carry the whole burden of putting over Social Credit. . . . Well, we got Calgary pretty well organized for Social Credit. Then Aberhart called on us again for volunteer speakers to go out into the country. . . .

After getting the south pretty well lined-up, I tore up to Edmonton. There, I helped organize study groups in different sections of the city. . . . In March [1934] I took to the country towns [east of Edmonton] again.⁶⁰

Evidence of the existence of a working-class influence on Social Credit's development can also be observed in Aberhart's major written expositions of Social Credit theory. Aberhart published two such pamphlets, both of them intended as short surveys of the theory suitable for use in study groups. The first one, "The Douglas System of Economics," was published in May 1933 and popularly called the "Yellow Pamphlet" (because of the colour of its cover). It had a markedly different orientation from the second major work, the "Social Credit Manual," better known as the "Blue Pamphlet," which was published in early 1935. The Yellow Pamphlet was directed particularly towards workers and urban consumers. It spoke about unemployment, hours of work, and overproduction of commodities due to the use of machinery, and suggests a \$25 a month dividend to alleviate consumers' lack of purchasing power. And, significantly, it does not include the phrase "just price," by which the Social Credit movement summed up its promise of a fair return for agricultural products.⁶¹ The "just price" was understandably a popular slogan among farmers, who had seen their main saleable product, wheat, decline in

⁵⁶ *Alberta Social Credit Chronicle*, 29 March 1935, 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1935, 2.

⁵⁸ Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, 62.

⁵⁹ Schultz, "William Aberhart," 134 and 149; and *Calgary Herald*, 18 May 1935, 2.

⁶⁰ Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, 278.

⁶¹ William Aberhart, B.A., "The Douglas System of Economics: Credit Power for Democracy, A System of State Credit Which Will Supply Purchasing Power to the Consumer: This is a brief outline of the above system as applied to our Western Provincial Needs," n.p., n.d.

MASS MEETING

**VARIETY THEATRE
SUN. DEC. 11**

AT 8 p.m.

Subject: The Need For A
Xmas Clothing Allowance

SPEAKERS from:

Unemployed Union

Unemployed Ex-Servicemen's Assn.

Women's Unemployed Assn.

All Aldermen Invited to Attend and Speak

ALL THE PUBLIC ARE INVITED

— MOST IMPORTANT —

price by 66 per cent from 1929 to 1932.⁶² But its appeal was not universal. Irving's interviews with people in Alberta show that while farmers overwhelmingly spoke of being favourably influenced by the "just price" promise, workers described another feature, the \$25 a month dividend, as most attractive.⁶³

The fact that the "just price" features so prominently in the Blue Pamphlet but is absent from the earlier Yellow Pamphlet is no accident. And it cannot be ascribed to Aberhart's acknowledged perversion of Social Credit theory.⁶⁴ A distortion of the theory does not account for the change from one pamphlet to its successor. What is revealed by the shift in emphasis is the changing class support for the Social Credit movement through this period. Early in Social Credit's rise, support from the working class of Calgary was already tangible. Aberhart's pamphlet was aimed at explaining the theory to, and winning even greater support from, that class. On the other hand, the support of rural farmers was still largely uncertain. Not until summer 1933, after he had published the Yellow Pamphlet, did Aberhart make his first tour of rural Southern Alberta and come face to face with his rural devotees and their problems. It was after this connection was made that the Blue Pamphlet, with its change in class emphasis, appeared.

IV

WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE in Calgary were important parts of the Social Credit movement even before it took a mass form. The composition of the original study group is commonly considered to have been middle-class.⁶⁵ Certainly some of the people in it — Mrs. Edith Rogers, Ernest Manning, Mrs. Edith Gostick, and Fred Anderson — were members of the petit bourgeoisie. But others, who were equally active, arose from a different class. Clifford Willmott was a CPR conductor; Edward Geehan was a machinist; A.J. Logan, a clerk in the civic relief office; Mrs. MacCulloch, the wife of a blacksmith; and Arthur Wray, a clerical jack-of-all-trades. One veteran Social Crediter, A.J. Hooke, recalls that nine people comprised "the majority of the original speaking team" which fanned out through the province dispensing the Social Credit gospel.⁶⁶ Of these nine, four — Willmott, Wray, Jack Landeryou, and Eric Poole — were working-class. Four others — Anderson, Mrs. Rogers, Mrs. Gostick and Earl Ansley — were petit-bourgeois. There is no record of the occupation of one, Joe Unwin, whose loan request was rejected by Aberhart.

⁶² Seymour, Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan, A Study in Political Sociology* (Garden City, New York 1968), 46.

⁶³ Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, 254.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 68-9.

⁶⁶ Alfred J. Hooke, *30 + 5: I Know, I Was There* (Edmonton 1971), 69.

TABLE 3
Social Credit Activists and Letter Writers in Calgary

Those with identifiable occupation		
Males	89	
Females	36	125
Those without identifiable occupation		
Males	42	
Females	14	56
Total		181

Table 4 below charts the occupations of 125 people who had some involvement in the Social Credit movement during the period 1933 to 1935.⁶⁷ The figures point out that skilled and unskilled workers made up almost half of the people active in the movement. Retail clerks and office workers represented a further 15 per cent of the total, bringing the sum of working-class representation in the movement to almost two-thirds. The figures also show that those who could be considered "middle class" constituted just over one-third of the activists in the movement in Calgary prior to the provincial election.

One reason why there is a belief that Social Credit adherents were middle-class can be identified by separating from the activists all those who were Social Credit candidates in Calgary in the 1935 provincial, federal, and civic (including school board) elections. (Table 4) The figures indicate that the twenty candidates represented a very select part of the activists. Fully half of them are petit-bourgeois, although a large proportion are lower level working professionals. It is no surprise that the candidates were of a higher social class than the activists in general, since Aberhart declared that he wanted candidates

⁶⁷ Tables 3 and 4 were prepared by compiling the names of all the people associated with Social Credit study groups in Calgary as listed in the *Alberta Social Credit Chronicle* and the *Calgary Herald* up to 22 August 1935, from identifiable interviews in Irving's *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta*, from interviews conducted by this author, and from letters favourable to Social Credit written to the *Herald* in the period before 22 August 1935. As it is a list of secondary leaders and activists, Aberhart is not included.

There was some concern about considering the nineteen letter writers in with the larger group of activists, since people who write letters to daily newspapers might be an unrepresentative sample. Analysis of that group did show that they tended to be of somewhat higher social class than the activists. But the statistical shift introduced by including them was so slight that the letter writers were included in the larger group.

People's occupations were derived from Henderson's *City Directory* for the period 1930-6. Almost one-third of the people were either not listed in the directory, had no occupation listed, were retired, or were listed as "Employee of . . ." making a precise identification of their occupation impossible. Married women on the list who were not employed were classified according to their husband's occupation.

TABLE 4
 Social Credit Activists and Letter Writers (including Candidates) in Calgary
 1933-5, Classified According to Occupation, and the Proportion in Each
 Classification

Candidates in 1935 Federal, Provincial, and Civic Elections, Classified
 According to Occupation, and the Proportion in Each Classification

	Activists (candidates included)		Candidates	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1. Senior managers of large businesses	1	(1%	1	5%
2. Upper level, self-employed professionals (doctors, lawyers, dentists, accountants, school principals)	11	9%	2	10%
3. Lower level professionals (teachers, nurses)	12	10%	5	25%
4. Small business owners	13	10%	2	10%
5. Salesmen and insurance agents	5	4%	2	10%
6. Government functionaries (weed inspector)	1	(1%	0	0%
7. Farmers	2	2%	0	0%
8. Skilled workers	32	26%	5	25%
9. Unskilled workers (including postal letter carriers)	29	23%	1	5%
10. Retail clerks and office workers (stenographers, clerks)	19	15%	2	10%
Total	125	(101%	20	100%

who were "reliable, honorable, bribe-proof business men."⁶⁸ And since an advisory committee of seven people, including Aberhart, selected the candidate from among three or four chosen by the constituency organization, Aberhart's wishes were respected.⁶⁹ In Calgary, the advisory committee came down particularly hard on the candidates chosen by local Social Credit members. Among the six provincial candidates the committee chose were two men who had been defeated at the nominating convention of local members, and one who was not nominated at all. Later evaluations suggest that these measures were necessary to increase the party's appeal to the middle and upper

⁶⁸ Schultz, "William Aberhart," 114, citing *Alberta Social Credit Chronicle*, 7 December 1934, 1-2.

⁶⁹ Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, 141.

classes in the city.⁷⁰ One of the choices was John Hugill, KC, who practised in the prestigious firm founded by Senator James Loughheed, and in which then-Prime Minister R.B. Bennett was once a partner. Another was O.G. Devenish, a Calgary oil company and apartment block owner. Even though loyalty to Aberhart within the movement was then virtually complete, there was dissatisfaction with these choices and grumbling that hard-working veterans had been passed over in favour of socially-prominent newcomers to the cause.⁷¹

The stratagem of using caviar as bait to catch fat cats did meet with some success. The provincial electoral distribution at the time had Calgary carved out as a single six-member constituency, so it is impossible now to differentiate precisely support for candidates according to city district. However, a newspaper report of the 1935 election did indicate that voting preference was very closely class-aligned. Devenish, for example, headed the list of candidates in eight well off southwest Calgary districts, but fared so poorly elsewhere that he did not win a seat. On the other hand, working-class districts in east, central, and northeast Calgary had a consistent preference for the three Social Credit candidates who were nominated by the city party convention and survived the cuts made by the advisory board.⁷²

The strong working-class representation in the Social Credit movement is also apparent in the distribution of study groups through the city. During the first four months of operation the *Alberta Social Credit Chronicle* made a habit of listing study groups as they were formed, naming executive members, and talking up the frequent meetings, socials, and other activities of each group. During the period from July to October 1934 the *Chronicle* mentioned 43 groups in Calgary, of which 24 were in southeast and northeast districts composed of working-class people, 5 were in predominantly working-class areas of central Calgary, and 12 were in petit-bourgeois districts or in towns immediately outside of Calgary. Two others — the young men's and young women's groups — were not specific to any geographic area. The *Chronicle's* comments emphasize that not only were working-class groups in the majority during this period but they were also the most active. The Trades and Labor Temple Social Crediters, for example, were "a real live wire group."⁷³ But without a doubt, the largest, most active, and most unusual of all the study groups was at the Ogden Shops.

At one time or another every city has something like it — an industrial plant that becomes the centre of a city's attention, captures its imagination, and even embodies its hopes. In Calgary during the 1930s the Ogden Shops formed the pivot about which so much seemed to turn. It was the largest single concentration of workers in the city, 1,600 workers labouring together in two or three buildings, repairing CPR engines, freights, and passenger cars. But the Ogden

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷¹ See a letter from "Veritas" in the *Calgary Herald*, 27 July 1935, 5.

⁷² *The Albertan*, 23 August 1935, 1.

⁷³ *Alberta Social Credit Chronicle*, 27 July 1934, 8.

Shops was as much a political as it was an industrial cauldron. A depression was raging through the country, and like everyone, the Ogden Shops workers were discussing the whys and wherefores of it. When an election occurred, that discussion became even more fervent. Amelia (Turner) Smith, a CCF candidate in several elections in Calgary, recalls campaigning at the Ogden Shops during the 1930s:

We used to go down there in our campaigns and have meetings at noon hour, in the shops. . . . We just went down there and walked in. Somebody would jump up on a big iron table, act as chairman and introduce us, and the people would stand politely and listen to us. If there was any official opposition [from the CPR] I never heard or saw anything of it.⁷⁴

Such meetings were not restricted to election times. Late in 1933 or early in 1934, William Aberhart also spoke at the Ogden Shops. Recalling that noteworthy day, one worker has said that

he came to our plant and talked to us workers one noon hour. . . . I thought that Aberhart must have something on the ball, with so much goods in the world and no money to buy them. . . . So then our shops formed a Social Credit group, and eventually our whole plant was organized into the . . . group for Social Credit. We had hundreds of members. Our group raised more money for the movement than any other — gangs of us workers would assemble to raise money to pay for Aberhart's Social Credit broadcasts.⁷⁵

CPC members and supporters were also vociferous participants in the mass debate that swirled through the Ogden Shops, even though they apparently could not hold open meetings on the premises. *The Worker* maintained as late as June 1935 that "Communism or Social Credit" was the topic on the lips of everyone on relief projects and in the railway shops, although it admitted that, at least in the railway shops, its political adversary had the edge "right at the moment."⁷⁶ It considered this to be partly due to the advantage bestowed by the CPR in allowing Social Credit to organize right in the shop.⁷⁷

Already by spring 1934 the Social Credit railway workers had become a force in the shops themselves and throughout the city, injecting a vigour into the movement that grabbed the attention of Social Crediter and non-Social Crediter alike. The contribution made by the group that grew to about 200 workers was graphically illustrated during the visit of Major Douglas to Calgary in April 1934. Douglas' appearance had been organized by a group in the city which advocated pure Social Credit, unadulterated by Aberhart. Their intention was to slight Aberhart by excluding him from the speaker's podium at the meeting to be addressed by Douglas.⁷⁸ Irving describes in the following passage the situation which developed:

⁷⁴ Interview with Amelia (Turner) Smith.

⁷⁵ Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, 248, quoting "a worker in a large repair plant."

⁷⁶ *The Worker*, 4 June 1935, 3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 May 1935, 2.

⁷⁸ Irving, *Social Credit Movement*, 78.

Rumors circulated that the railway workers at the Ogden Shop . . . were determined not to let Douglas speak unless Aberhart were on the platform. Aberhart still insisted that he did not wish to attend the meeting. Then, it is said, the Ogden Social Crediters told him once again, in no uncertain terms, that he had better go to the meeting or Douglas would not be allowed to speak. Faced with the determined stand of his followers, as well as to prevent an uproar at the meeting, Aberhart reluctantly agreed to accept the invitation to appear on the platform.⁷⁹

But if Aberhart sincerely hoped to avoid an uproar he was disappointed. When it became evident that he was not going to be allowed to speak, a large section of the audience, shouting "We want Aberhart!" staged "a football rush from the bleacher seats to the centre of the hall," and the meeting broke up in pandemonium.⁸⁰ The image evoked — shock troops storming an enemy stronghold — strikingly portrays the function of the Ogden Social Credit study group, and, on a broader level, the function of the Calgary working class in the Social Credit movement. Furthermore, it demonstrates the constant working-class pressure exerted on Aberhart, a leader who is now known for his dynamism, but who was also characterized by occasional vacillation and outright timidity.

Driven by such an impulsive force, it is little wonder that Social Credit recruited a number of political organizers who had previously been in the CCF, the unemployed organizations, and the CPC. Several of these people developed into important activists and secondary leaders in the Social Credit movement. One of them was Fred Anderson, whose importance to the fledgling Social Credit group has been attested to by party veteran A.J. Hooke. Anderson, according to a close friend of his who spoke to Norman F. Priestly, vice-president of the United Farmers of Alberta, "is really a socialist and does not believe in the social credit proposals at all." Priestly reported this close friend to have said that Anderson joined the CCF shortly after it was founded, and worked hard for Amelia Turner in the January 1934 provincial by-election. But soon after, Priestly recalls, things changed:

About this time Anderson was getting into rather desperate straits through lack of work and, getting some appreciation of the rising strength of the Aberhart movement, swallowed his socialist scruples and forgot all about his antipathy to Mr. Aberhart and made friends of Aberhart and his followers.⁸¹

A man who made a similar political reversal was J.F. Maloney, who in spring 1933 reached the public eye as a spokesperson for the Unemployed Married Men's Association and a delegate to the Central Council of Unemployed which led the spring 1933 relief strike in Calgary.⁸² Maloney's conversion may have been precipitated by the anti-communist hysteria which was

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸¹ "Comment on Current Politics," September 1935, from Norman F. Priestly Papers, Social Credit Correspondence, 1931-1938, file in Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

⁸² *Calgary Herald*, 28 April 1933, 17.

created by the arrest of 14 unemployed leaders who were implicated in the April 1933 battle between city police and relief strikers and the alleged plot to launch a coordinated relief strike throughout the province on 1 May 1933. Maloney made a public denial that such a relief strike was planned, and declared further that he was not a Red nor did he think any member of the Central Council of the Unemployed was.⁸³ There is considerable doubt that the confession accurately applied to all his fellow central council members, several of whom were incarcerated and not in a position to go about making public declarations on the issue, even if they had wanted to do so. But for Maloney, the event marked a change in his activities. Within a year he was speaking at country meetings on behalf of Social Credit. A June 1934 letter to the *Herald* from a Social Creditor in a small town near Calgary commends Maloney for his good work for the movement but warns him "to see to it that all ties to his old friend, the CCF, are severed as they will pull him in the opposite direction [to the Social Credit movement]."⁸⁴

An even more remarkable political conversion was made by the mercurial Eric J. Poole. A bricklayer by trade, Poole became involved in the unemployed organizations in Calgary and played an important enough part in them to have been one of fourteen leaders of a relief strike who were arrested in April 1933.⁸⁵ Amelia (Turner) Smith remembers visiting Poole in jail then to take him some reading material, and believes that he was a CCF supporter, since "I have very friendly feelings for this man Poole and I don't know how I would have got it if he'd come from the enemy camp."⁸⁶ However, by June 1934 he too had joined the trek of Calgary Social Crediters speaking at rural meetings.⁸⁷ Yet, surprisingly, *The Worker* listed his name as a member of the Communist Party civic election committee in October 1934.⁸⁸ In such rancorous times these political gyrations must have been exceedingly difficult, and, in the long run, impossible to perform. In April 1935 the Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde Poole was declared persona non grata with the CPC by a letter to *The Worker* which hinted at his nefarious history.⁸⁹

Another case of a rapid political transformation in the city was Jack C. Landeryou, a carpenter who was also involved in the unemployed associations. With the rise of Social Credit he took up organizing for that movement.⁹⁰

Norman F. Priestly, speaking of such turncoats, concluded that "Whatever idealism there may be in this social credit movement which has swept the province of Alberta, there is certainly a great deal of paltriness and self-seeking

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1 May 1933, 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 June 1934, 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 28 April 1933, 17.

⁸⁶ Interview with Amelia (Turner) Smith.

⁸⁷ *Calgary Herald*, 15 June 1934, 4.

⁸⁸ *The Worker*, 11 October 1934, 2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 April 1935, 4.

⁹⁰ Interview with Pat Lenihan.

and an utter lack of principle on the part of many."⁹¹ If those were their motives, the converts reaped a bounteous harvest from their association with Social Credit. Anderson became an MLA for Calgary. In the October 1935 federal election, both Poole and Landeryou were sent to the Canadian parliament, Poole from Red Deer and Landeryou from the East Calgary constituency.⁹²

Such immediate financial rewards might not, however, have been their aim. Considering the circumstances, it is not at all farfetched to think that the RCMP, the Canadian state's political police, would sponsor informants in the ranks of newly-founded movements and parties. An RCMP constable working clandestinely was a member of the CPC from 1922 to 1928 and was the star witness in a 1931 trial which sent eight leaders of the party to jail for several years.⁹³ During the 1930s, as the Depression created desperate conditions and people cried out for profound social change, the RCMP would have been especially vigilant in seeking to preserve the status quo. Certainly Social Credit would not have been above the RCMP's suspicion.

V

WHAT EMERGES FROM this study of Social Credit's roots is a new appreciation for the influence of an urban working class on a political movement that is commonly regarded as exclusively representative of farmers. The activity of members of Calgary's working class was vital to the electoral triumph of Social Credit in 1935. A movement that Macpherson considers to be the incarnation of independent commodity producers' political action in fact got much of its impetus from the working class of Calgary.

⁹¹ Priestly, "Current Politics."

⁹² *Canada Year Book 1938*.

⁹³ William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke, eds. *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck* (Toronto 1974), 172, 189.